ON THE TRAIL OF THE MOTION PICTURE

Charlie Chaplin and The Pure Idea

By Kenneth Macgowan

Mrs. Fiske says that Charlie Chaplin is a very great artist.

Praise from Sir Hubert indeed. Deep talking to deep. Some might say—one of the non-cognoscenti—the tribute of the greatest voiceless player of the stage to the most eloquent mime of the silent screen.

However that may be, the large portions of New York that saw "Shoulder Arms" know that Mrs. Fiske is right. And they know that it isn't the pants or the boots or the cane. For they were all absent. It's art—personality plus precision and invention.

There are other screen comics who can kick a fellow player in the only possible place. There are others who can deposit either squash pie or camembert with equal ease and accuracy on an upturned eye. There are those who understand as thoroughly the possibilities of pin and bayonet. But who handles the harlequin trunnion with the clean-cut, exact, scrupulous precision of Chaplin?

Shaw once exuded a bit of characteristic enthusiasm over the people of vaudeville—singers, dancers, acrobats—recognizing healthy, vigorous, self-reliant art in even the toss of the well-aimed handerchief from one trapezist to another. His heart should go out—it probably has gone—to the solemn little black-browed actor who accomplishes the heavy comicalities of Keystonerie with the nicety of a Pavlova doing a glide or a chartered accountant running up a column.

And, of course, that is why Chaplin makes such a marvellously perky little Prussian in his chef-d'œuvre of the Kaiser's capture. It is this same machine-like economy of means and effort which makes so much of the incident in which Chaplin shoots half a dozen Germans through a loophole. There is not the slightest extravagance of gesture or facial play. Chaplin makes it a ridiculously businesslike matter of aim, recoil, inspect and chalk 'em up.

At this point enter another and less basic element in the Chaplin humor—the comic idea. As Chaplin methodically chalks up one more trophy, zip! comes a bullet and off goes his helmet. And off, too, comes the last tally mark on the board, where he has been keeping count. Then another mechanical and precise routine of aim, recoil, inspect—and back goes the chalk mark.

Screen comedy of the Keystone variety, like the humor of revues, has long been largely a matter of vaudeville. The comedian—or sometimes the writer or director behind him—invents a number of disconnected "stunts," each with a bit of the sharp turned quality of a spoken gag. Sometimes they are mere details, like opening a beer bottle by the Chaplin method of holding it up above the parapet where the bullets are flying. Often they are joined together into more elaborate series of comic episodes, like the aquatic bunks, the floating candle that burns a sleeping soldier's toes and the periscope made from a phonograph horn—all making up the rainy trench scene from "Shoulder Arms."

Sometimes the comic invention rises to the heights of a real idea. "Shoulder Arms" contains the best in many a reel. It is the camouflaging of Chaplin as a tree and his pursuit through a forest. Kant could have dubbed that the "pure idea." Bergson might nominate it a "concept."

But there is something more to the Chaplin of "Shoulder Arms" than precision and invention playing through the terms of a colorful if diminutive personality. There is real substance in his anecdotage. Much of the humors of the drenched trench strike home with a disturbing reality. "Shoulder Arms" takes a place in that valhalla of veritable war-comedy, which—but for Sergeant Berlin's "Yip, Yip, Yaphank!" and Captain Bairnsfather's "Better 'Ole"—is distressingly empty. Unquestionably, we should have had more of this sort of thing, more of the grin-and-bear-it and more of sub-surface satire, more of Briggs and more of Bill Hill. And less, a lot less of Christie and Flagg and Harrison Fisher.

Charlie's only less excellent brother Sid had a part in "Shoulder Arms," and its whiskers made more than one movie-fan say "Looks like Bairnsfather's old 'walrus.'" Which leaves one inclined to pray that the next Chaplin will be a picturization of that jolly old "Better 'Ole." And it ought to be an all-tar production with Hank Mann—Elihu Root hair and Theda Bara eyes—as Bert, with Chester Conklin, the only original "walrus" of the screen, as Ol' Bill, and with Charles himself as a much elaborated and furbished and redecorated version of Alf, proprietor of the miss-fire cigarette lighter and pocket tank.

Charlie Chaplin singing "Believe me if all those endearing young charms," to his bride.

Billie Burke, Strand. ©©M.

Lieutenant Bert Hall.

An American Ace Is An Elusive Thing

Lieutenant Bert Hall is a personage. He is an American ace, which is really better than four aces, and has been known to put to rout even a royal flush. But we started out to be serious, for this is a serious subject.

Lieutenant Hall has been at the front for three years, and has participated in more than 100 aerial battles. He is one of two survivors of the Lafayette Escadrille. He has been twice wounded and he wears seven wonderful medals pinned on his French uniform. And so, for that reason, we were prepared to be very serious when we met him and to talk learnedly of the war and the outcome.

And then, when you do meet him, he is so simple and boyish that you forget you are talking to a great personage. And when he says "Let's not talk about me; let's talk about the new plays, and the pictures, and the restaurants, and the horse show, and dancing" if you are weak minded, as we are, you will say, "All right," even while you know that you owe it to your public and your paper to find out all about Lieutenant Hall's war career and how he likes acting for the movies.

Lieutenant Hall has just finished his first picture, "A Romance of the Air," which was made from his book, "En l'Air." This we know, not because he told us, but because we saw it last week.

Edith Day is the heroine, and we are sure that no real heroine could be so charming as this heroine of fiction.

Miss Day used to be the heroine in "Going Up," and if we had time we would think up something clever about "Going Up" and "A Romance of the Air." But we must return to Lieutenant Hall, for he would just like to take this chance to escape and not be interviewed.

"Isn't it thrilling and terribly dangerous to be an aviator?" we asked, hoping to wring some inadvertent confessions from this most modest young hero.

"Not very thrilling any more and certainly not very dangerous. Don't they serve a wonderful hors d'œuvres here? You know, with the new type of machine, you just can't fall," and the great American ace dismissed the subject.

But one becomes hardened after years in the service, so we said, "How did you first think of flying? And aren't you a Southerner? We know you are, by your accent."

"Yes, ma'am"—and it was that "Yes, ma'am," that gave us our first clew to his native state. "I'm from Kentucky, and perhaps that answers your other question, too. That is why I am an aviator. When I was fourteen years old I became a jockey."

"A jockey," we exclaimed. "Why, aren't you too big to be a jockey?" For Lieutenant Hall looks now just as an American ace ought to look.

"Well, I wasn't too big then. You should have seen me! I ran away and became a jockey because my father, who owned a big stock farm in Kentucky, wanted me to go to school, instead of riding horses all the time. I could not tolerate such oppression, so I sought pastures new. And often this was literally true in the first year or two.

"And then I went to ride in England and by and by there was no more falls and no more thrills in the life of a jockey, so I became a driver of racing cars. Between times I travelled and I have lived pretty much in every country in the world.

"And I happened to be in France when the war broke out, so I offered my services and later I became an aviator. That is all there is to it. Now do have some of this vanilla ice cream with hot chocolate sauce on it. I have it every day."

"And how do you like making motion pictures?" we asked insistently.

"Very much. I think I'll make some more. Let's go to the horse show."

And so we gave up and went to the horse show.

H. U.

The Handicap Under Which the Movies Operate

By Heywood Broun

The motion picture business is being operated under at least one large handicap. The producing firms do not buy plots so much as they buy titles. A successful play always finds its way to the screen on the strength of its name, whether it has any material for good picturization or not. Probably nobody thought that a good film could be made out of "A Doll's House," for instance, but the fame of that particular title was too great to resist.

As a matter of fact, a good play is almost invariably a bad starting point for a scenario. If the dramatist has done his work well he has pressed the action into a few given scenes. The motion picture scenario requires many scenes. Practically every play which is put upon the screen is vastly padded. No play has enough material to make more than some hundred feet of film, while the completed picture must run into the thousands. Even "Peer Gynt," with all its incidents, contained insufficient action for the screen, and the picturization had to be eked out with pirate ships and negro slaves and things of which Ibsen never dreamed. A bad play is very likely to make a better scenario than a good play, because it is not so well centralized. If a dramatist allows some important action in his play to occur off stage, he has probably done a poor piece of work, but it makes no difference to the movie man whether the happening occurred on stage or off. It is easy for him to fill in the gaps. In fact, if there are no gaps he will probably have to make up a few.

When stories are written for the screen alone scenarios will be better. Moreover, when the standard length of the feature firm has been shortened the movies will be more enthralling. A story can be told so rapidly on the screen that the most attractive bill probably would be made up of three or four distinct picture tales. When the short film has come into favor, as it should and may, we will be rid of scenes in which the heroine feeds pigeons and does other perfectly meaningless things just to give the audience a run for its money.

Movie Notes

Raymond L. Schrock, popularly known as Ray, disappeared not so long ago and no one knew where he had gone. But recently he has come to light in the Fox studios, where he is writing scenarios for Peggy Hyland, George Walsh and the Lee children.

Ray is in himself a sort of triumvirate. He is editor, author or director, as fate or fancy dictates. It was Ray who wrote "In Bad" for William Russell, "Her Hour" for Kitty Gordon, and "A Leap to Fame" and "His Royal Highness" for Carlyle Blackwell.

We encountered him in the tea room the other day and asked him what he was doing, to which he replied, "Caught in the Act" with Peggy Hyland and "Swatting the Fly" with the Lee children.

Predictions are odious, but our advice is keep your eye on this breezy Westerner.

Word from England carries the news that the World picture, "Inside the Lines," starring Lewis S. Stone, is repeating its phenomenal American success across the sea.

New Films This Week

"The Make-Believe Wife," the latest Paramount photoplay starring Billie Burke, will be shown at the Strand Theatre this week, and it is said that Miss Burke has the very best rôle of her entire screen career. She portrays the part of a young society woman of high station, who is lost while mountain climbing with a young man. The situation is aggravated by the fact that she is the fiancee of a lawyer, while the man who is lost with her is himself the fiance of an estimable young lady. The photo comedy is an adaptation of a story by Edward Childs Carpenter, directed by John Stuart Robertson. The support provided for Miss Burke is of the best. Her leading man is David Powell, a well known screen player. "The Topical Review," edited by Max Spiegel, contains the latest news pictures of interest, and "The Allied War Review," released through the Committee on Public Information, reveal some newly arrived pictures taken with our troops in France and Italy. A scenic travel picture, a scientific study of prehistoric animals and a new comedy conclude the film part of the entertainment. The entire fifth act of Gounod's "Faust" will be presented with Alys Michot as Marguerite, Ralph Erolle as Faust, and Yon Collignon as Mephistofeles. Mr. Collignon will also sing Oley Speak's new patriotic song, "When the Boys Come Home." The Symphony Orchestra will play the overture, "Morning, Noon and Night." Carl Edouarde will conduct.

The first government showing of "Under Four Flags," the third United States official war picture issued by the division of films of the Committee on Public Information, which was assembled under the supervision of S. L. Rothapfel, will be simultaneously made at the Rivoli and the Rialto theatres to-day, and the presentations will continue during the week. The entire pictorial programme will be devoted to the war feature, and the musical numbers will all follow the theme of the picture.

The overture at both theatres will be the "American Festival March," composed by Hugo Riesenfeld.

At the Rivoli the orchestra will be conducted by Erno Rapee; the Rialto Male Quartette, composed of John Young and Horatio Rench, tenors; George Reardon, barytone, and Donald Chambers, basso, will sing "Rose of No Man's Land," and there will be an organ solo by Professor Firmen Swinnen. The intermediary organ numbers will be played by J. Van Cleft Cooper.

At the Rialto Mr. Riesenfeld will lead the orchestra, Greek Evans will sing "Rose of No Man's Land" and Arthur Depew will contribute an organ solo. "Under Four Flags," it is announced, depicts the battles leading up to the Hun surrender, as well as the dark days immediately preceding the turn of the tide. There is the council at Versailles, the ceremony of making General Foch the supreme head of the Allied armies, the embarkation of American troops, convoys at sea, intimate scenes on shipboard, sighting of an enemy submarine, with a realistic engagement; the sinking of depth bombs and the oil-covered water, showing the loss of another U-boat; the arrival of American troops in France, preparations for the grand advance, the battles in and around Château Thierry, the advance of the French and British, the Italian defence of Venice and many other sentimental scenes the showing of which has been made possible by the signing of the armistice. Each night at both theatres will have a special significance for the Allied countries. Sunday will be Allies' night; Monday, French night; Tuesday, British night; Wednesday, Italian night; Thursday, Belgian night, and Friday, American night. Representatives of the various governments will participate. On Friday afternoon the wounded marines and soldiers now in New York will be the guests of Manager S. L. Rothapfel and Director Charles S. Hart of the United States Division of Films. Saturday afternoon will be Red Cross day.

At both theatres Fatty Arbuckle will be seen in "The Sheriff," a new comedy.

At the Broadway Charles Chaplin and his bride, Mildred Harris, will be seen, not as joint stars, but in two separate productions. Miss Harris is appearing in "Borrowed Clothes," a Lois Weber picture, and the inimitable Charlie will remain for a fourth week in "Shoulder Arms."

Fatty Arbuckle, in his latest comedy, called "The Sheriff," in which he seeks to outdo Douglas Fairbanks and William S. Hart by climbing church towers and invading a Mexican town to save the schoolma'am, will be the added attraction at Loew's New York Theatre and Roof on Monday and Tuesday of next week. Other features scheduled for the week will be Margarita Fischer, in "The Mantle of Charity," on Monday; "Fires of Hope," with Harold Lockwood, on Tuesday; "The One Woman," by Thomas Dixon, with Clara Williams, on Wednesday; Monroe Salisbury, in "Hugon the Mighty," on Thursday; Priscilla Dean, in "Kiss or Kill," and Shorty Hamilton, in "My Flag," on Friday, and Montagu Love and Dorothy Green, in "The Grouch," on Saturday.

Shadows on the Screen

Alexander Herbert will appear in a screen classics production of "The Man Who Stayed at Home," playing the part he originated in the first American stage version of this drama, which was produced under the title of "The White Feather."

Mr. Herbert expects to make an Australian tour soon, having been engaged for a company which will present New York successes of the present season in the land of the boomerang. His part in "The Man Who Stayed at Home" is Norman Preston, the leading juvenile. Herbert Blache has directed the production, which has been picturized by June Mathis from the drama.

Maurice Tourneur has just announced his intention of going to California for the winter, making his next three or four productions on the coast. He will leave with his staff immediately after completing "My Lady's Garter," the adaptation of the late Jacques Futrelle's detective romance now in course of filming.

It will be the director's first visit to the coast.

Everybody in the Vitagraph studio, from office boy to star, was presented with a $5 bill by Albert E. Smith last Monday in honor of the signing of the armistice. And then he gave them a half holiday to go and spend it. And if they stayed in Brooklyn $5 was enough to last them, money goes so much further on the other side of the bridge.

W. V. Hart, veteran motion picture man, is going to give one of his Billy Hart nights at the Elks' home, 108 West Forty-third Street, to-night. These nights have heretofore been only for invited guests, but this time an admission will be charged and the proceeds will go to the United War Work Campaign. One may be assured of seeing all of our very best film people.

"Your Fighting Navy at Work and at Play," the Educational Films Corporation's picture of Uncle Sam's glorious sea fighters, will come into added prominence as the result of the great events of the last fortnight. The navy that took the victors to Europe will now begin to bring them back. The warfare against the deadly mine and submarine is succeeded by the policing of the northern European waters, and due measures to cope with any sinister designs of the Bolshevist fleets. In the final peace settlement the great rôle of guarding the seas in behalf of the league of nations is to be shared by the navies of America, Great Britain, France and Italy.

Cecil B. De Mille's newest artcraft picture has been titled "Don't Change Your Husband." It is expected that the picture will receive the indorsement of all unmarried men.

A letter from little Bessie Love says that the weather in California is unbearably hot, that 500 persons were arrested in San Francisco in one day for not wearing "flu" masks and that she is making a new picture called "The Enchanted Barn," which will be awaited with considerable interest.

Marguerite Clark will return to New York, following her honeymoon, to start work on "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch," Alice Hegan Rice's famous subject. Hugh Ford, the Famous Players-Lasky director, was the first to produce "Mrs. Wiggs" on the American as well as the English stage and he will direct the screening of this play.

Select Pictures Corporation announces two new pictures for the month of November. These will be "The Road Through the Dark," the Maud Radford Warren story of the war, in which Clara Kimball Young is starred, and Alice Brady in a typical New York story, "Her Great Chance."

William Nigli and l'Enfant Terrible

By Harriette Underhill

Being efficient means knowing how to do things for yourself. Being most efficient means knowing how to get other people to do them for you. Therefore, we say that we are efficient in the superlative, for just look at what William Nigli did for us!

Mr. Nigli is a director with ideas. Not that that absolutely puts him in a class by himself, but Nigli's ideas are esoteric, some people even say impractical.

One day last week we went up to the Biograph studio to find out just what his ideas were, and instead of grudgingly giving us ten minutes of his precious time he talked for two hours, and when he had finished we had forgotten all he had said at the beginning. So we said ingratiatingly: "Please, Mr. Nigli, put it down on paper." He did. Here it is:

"The moving picture is the youngest of the arts. And it has suffered from that lack of respectful consideration that is always the portion of the youngest in any family. Its older brothers and sisters—the stage, painting, literature and all the others, grown up and established as they are—received the new member of the family as rather an indelicate accident, surprising, regrettable, hardly to be tolerated."

Personally, we consider this a terribly clever way of putting it, and we wish we had said it. As Oscar Wilde or some one said, "Probably you will."

"Now, the truth is that the moving picture is no longer a baby, nor even a child. It is already grown up—but still growing. And it is no longer so much a question as to what its elders can teach it, as to what it can teach them.

"Take the stage.

Many a so-called great artist accepted by the stage fails miserably before the motion picture camera. The names of these are legion. And they fail—whatever their excuses may be—for one reason, they cannot act well enough for the screen.

The motion picture must create the voice through the eye, by the power of suggestion. It can actually visualize the human voice.

"A motion picture actress, if she feels and knows, can in playing a scene so create the impression of having cried out that her audience, on seeing it, cries out with her. They hear the very tones of her voice. And afterward, when they are alone, they still hear that voice, that silent voice that never was, ringing in their ears. The movie can thus achieve a sound effect whose intensity the real stage, with the actual voice, can create only by some unusual trick—perhaps putting out the lights and having the voice cry out from a dark stage—having the ear alone played upon for a second of time, as in the motion picture it is the eye alone.

"It is the optic nerve that is engaged during the taking in of a motion picture, and its undisturbed power is at its keenest. No gesture can be meaningless, or untrue, or unnecessary without being immediately noticed.

"If the motion picture ever develops stereopticon quality and finds practicable some voice adjunct, then the moving picture actor can be as generally slipshod in his work as the stage actor. But not until then.

"A few weeks ago a motion picture critic in one of the local papers wrote an article suggesting that:

"'Producers should select persons of actual or potential pantomimic ability rather than individuals whose talents qualified them primarily for the spoken drama.'

"Nothing could be further from the truth. Pantomime is not wanted in the motion picture, but reality. The self-consciousness of pantomime is immediately felt. Realism is the essential quality of the motion picture, so much so that I think in time we will become so tired of seeing ourselves just as we are that we will demand a stage art something like that of the Japanese—the art of conventional gesture. But of the stage—as it is. For an actress, swept along by the power of a climatic story, played upon by the tones of her own voice, sustained by the absorbed attention of the hundreds of sympathetic souls in her audience—for this actress to shed real tears is nothing.

"But put her in the cruel glare of studio lights, without the impulsion of any consecutive story, with no preparatory scenes, no thrilling voice, no stimulating audience, and let her, when the emergency demands, out of her own imagination and will create real tears—that is something.

"But it is not enough.

"Feeling alone is not enough. Feeling and its genuine, its artistic, its well balanced expression—that is what is demanded.

"I have lately been studying some thousands of feet of film of Theodore Roosevelt for the picture of his life that I am now directing. Now, the motion pictures of Theodore Roosevelt making some of the most stirring speeches of his life mean nothing. You see a man evidently excited about something making an obtrusive gesture over and over again. This gesture—a thumping forward and down of the right hand—becomes the focus of interest. What Roosevelt is excited about cannot in the least be imagined. And the gesture, after its second repetition, becomes too insistent for endurance. Yet this is a picture of a great man making a great speech—only nobody would know it.

"But if Mr. Roosevelt had been trained to express himself correctly before the motion picture camera what he was saying would register and, with the main points of his thought carried through in titles, his whole speech could be followed on the screen with perfect understanding and enjoyment.

"Or to take that most visual of public speakers, Billy Sunday. If he would make exactly the gesture that went with each tone of his voice by putting what he was saying into printed words, a movie of Billy Sunday would accomplish almost as much as a 'personal appearance.'

"Everything shows before the motion picture camera—the tiredness behind the laugh, the little sneer behind the smile, the unbelief behind the eye. Whatever the mind is thinking is expressed in motion picture photography. It takes art to make it show perfectly what one is feeling, but it takes more to make it not show. Naturalism, realism, with restraint and balance—these are the gifts of the motion picture to the people who intelligently work for it.

"And stage directing, as well as acting, owes a lot to the movie. No more will Hamlet soliloquize with his hand stuck in where William Hart's pistol would be. No more is an actor taught to pivot on the ball of the foot while performing the simple act of turning around. He is encouraged to turn around in whatever way is most natural. The grace of Nature is asked for, not the grace of bunkum. The moving picture has strongly affected the technique of story writing. A film writer can no longer camouflage a story in words. The public is too trained to a 'show-me' attitude of mind by the movies.

"Also the movie, through the title that links its scenes, has developed a taste for direct writing, sentences, few words. In a picture directed some years ago I remember telling in one title five changes that a book we were getting our.

"Particularly is the movie influencing the form of the drama. More is the long, methodical story of the popular division of material. The story is told now in a long succession of short, loosely connected or almost entirely disconnected scenes.

"And, as for playwriting, here the influence of the motion picture is paramount. A good play now begins when the curtain rises.

"A motion picture can begin anywhere. A play now realizes that it can do the same. No longer do the butler and the maid commence the evening's entertainment with a discursive résumé of the experiences and temperament of the master. Servants in plays now do what a servant does. The art of the modern drama is action.

"A good play could run for ten acts and not become monotonous. The majority of plays should run only ten minutes.

"In the fields of painting and sculpture the influence of the movies has been overwhelming, because the movies have forced modern art and artists to give up the aim of representing nature in their work. It has made them realize that the representative element—the element of likeness—is not the purpose of a work of art. The still camera emphasized this for them, but the moving picture made it irrefutable, because the movies can show the external world, not only objectively, but living, in all its movements. One only needs to note that all modern art has relinquished any attempt to compete with the movies in this field and has been forced to search for other harmonies, other beauties.

"A new field has been opened to music in the original scores written to interpret the emotion of a screen drama. A good movie is really musical in its construction—its continuity is linear. This relationship between a motion picture and a musical score is now but at the commencement of its development.

"In fact, when one stops to take a good look at the matter, it is clear that since the arrival of the movie—this l'enfant terrible of the arts—not one in its whole family will ever be the same."